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3 Key Figures in Contra Supply Line

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MIAMI, Dec. 9 — Three veterans of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, all with long ties to the Central Intelligence Agency and one of them an accused international terrorist, have emerged as key figures in the clandestine air network that delivered tons of weapons and ammunition to the anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua.

One of the veterans, Luis Posada Carriles, a 58-year-old expert in guerrilla warfare and demolitions, escaped from a Venezuelan prison in August 1985 after being held for nearly 10 years on charges of masterminding a bombing that destroyed a Cuban airliner and killed 73 people. The case is still pending in Venezuela.

According to American crew members of the planes that carried the rebel war matériel, the three Bay of Pigs veterans were instrumental in setting up the headquarters for the supply operation in San Salvador and in coordinating cargo drops to rebel units operating inside Nicaragua.

Critics regard Mr. Posada, who has devoted much of his life to trying to undermine the Communist Government of Fidel Castro, as a terrorist and say his involvement with United States-backed Nicaraguan rebels seems starkly at odds with the Reagan Administration's campaign against international terrorism. Supporters, however, regard Mr. Posada as a dedicated Cuban nationalist and question the validity of the bombing charges.

U.S. Admits No Role

Reagan Administration officials have refused to acknowledge Mr. Posada's participation in the rebel supply operation. Administration officials have acknowledged that the United States monitored the operation, but they say it did not organize, finance or direct it. However, many of those whose participation has so far become known have had long relationships with United States intelligence services and military forces.

One of the Bay of Pigs veterans, Félix Ismael Rodríguez, who is 45 years old and an expert in guerrilla warfare, went to El Salvador in 1984 to train helicopter crews in aerial ambush and pursuit tactics, which friends said he learned on C.I.A. operations in South Vietnam.

The American crewmen say Mr. Rodríguez, who was known in El Salvador as Max Gómez, helped them get permission to operate out of the main base of the Salvadoran Air Force near the capital of El Salvador and served as liaison between them and senior Salvadoran military officers. The Americans say Mr. Rodríguez also obtained Salvadoran Air Force identification cards for them.

The American airmen say Mr. Posada, who used the alias Ramón Medina, was in charge of such administrative matters as housing, ground transportation and daily living expenses and was referred to as "the caretaker." Friends recall that in some Cuban exile groups that organized raids against Cuba in the 1960's, Mr. Posada was in charge of supplies, including explosives.

Field Liaison With Contras

The third Bay of Pigs veteran, Rafael Quintero, who is believed to be in his middle to late 40's, met with contra field commanders to determine what supplies they needed and where they wanted them dropped, then transmitted the information to the headquarters at Ilopango, the American fliers said.

The American airmen said Mr. Quintero regularly shuttled between Miami, San Salvador and the capitals of Costa Rica and Honduras and was given the nickname "The Traveler." They say he also used the code name Ralph.

Cuban-American friends here say Mr. Quintero has worked on a number of C.I.A. projects over the years throughout Latin America and possibly also in Africa. In 1983 Mr. Quintero testified in a Washington court that he had accepted an advance of $30,000 against a fee of $1 million from a former C.I.A. agent, Edwin P. Wilson, to assassinate a Libyan dissident in Egypt, but later changed his mind.

The crew members said Mr. Rodríguez had not originally been a part of the rebel supply operation, but that William J. Cooper, the chief pilot, had turned to Mr. Rodríguez for help because of his "local contacts" and that Mr. Rodríguez and the two other Bay of Pigs veterans soon became important members of the team.

A Connection to Bush

The airmen said tension arose between Mr. Rodríguez and Mr. Cooper as to who was in charge and that Mr. Cooper seemed intimidated by assertions from Mr. Rodríguez that he was a friend of Vice President Bush. Mr. Bush has referred to Mr. Rodríguez as "a patriot" and said he met with him three times, most recently at a reception in Miami on May 20 to mark Cuba's independence.

According to many accounts, Mr. Rodríguez and Mr. Posada worked for about a year at the Ilopango air base. They were often seen in the company of military and civilian officials of the United States and El Salvador as well as members of the contra forces. At least once, according to a United States Embassy spokesman in El Salvador, Mr. Rodríguez had lunch with the United States Ambassador, Edwin G. Corr.

Mr. Rodríguez was decorated by the Salvadoran Government for his work with the Salvadoran Air Force and one foreigner who has closely studied the Salvadoran military said Mr. Rodríguez had "probably done more than anyone to improve the military and hurt the guerrillas."

Yet officials of both the United States and El Salvador as well as rebel leaders deny any formal connection with either Mr. Rodríguez or Mr. Posada.

The presence of Mr. Rodríguez and Mr. Posada in El Salvador and their work on the contra resupply operation was made public by Eugene Hasenfus, a 45-year-old American who parachuted from a supply plane that was shot down in Nicaragua in early October. Mr. Cooper and two others died in the crash. Mr. Hasenfus has been sentenced to 30 years in prison by a Nicaraguan military court.

Ex-Official Corroborates

David A. Phillips, a retired C.I.A. official who was in charge of the agency's Latin American operations until 1975, said in an interview that the "stories in the press" about Mr. Posada "seem pretty accurate," adding, "I couldn't think of anything to dispute, including the parts saying he was connected to the agency."

A spokesman for the C.I.A. would not say whether the three men had ever worked for the agency.

Friends of Mr. Rodríguez describe him as a dedicated anti-Communist and say they believe he worked without salary in Central America. Sometimes, the friends said, they paid for airline tickets so that he could visit his wife and two grown children here. There have been persistent rumors that Mr. Posada's escape from the Venezuelan jail and his travel across the Caribbean to El Salvador were financed by wealthy Cuban-Americans in Miami.

In 1984 a group of Cuban-Americans here formed a committee to raise money for Mr. Posada, Dr. Orlando Bosch, a Miami pediatrician and two others jailed in the Cuban airline bombing. The group appealed to the United Nations and Amnesty International to urge Venezuela to bring the proceedings to a conclusion.

Dr. Armando Cruz and Dr. Alberto Hernández, two physicians who have been identified in the past with the committee, refused through their secretaries to speak to a journalist. Sila Cuervo, a Bay of Pigs veteran who has also been identified with the committee, hung up shortly after a journalist identified himself.

A Search of Phone Records

Mr. Cuervo is the godfather of one of Mr. Posada's sons and, according to records obtained from the Salvadoran telephone company, received at least

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two calls from a telephone in one of two safehouses used by the American air crews in El Salvador and frequented by Mr. Rodríguez and Mr. Posada. The telephone company records show a number of calls to friends and relatives of Mr. Rodríguez and Mr. Posada in Miami from the safehouses.

Friends and relatives say they have spoken to Mr. Rodríguez and Mr. Posada by telephone in the last few weeks and that they are trying to keep out of the public eye; some have spoken to Mr. Rodríguez in the last few days. He is believed to be in the United States, possibly Miami. The two others are believed to be in Central America.

After the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Mr. Rodriguez, Mr. Posada and about 200 other participants were given commissions in the United States Army. As many as 100 of the invasion veterans, including some who became army officers, continued to work closely with the C.I.A. on hundreds of attempts to destroy Mr. Castro's regime.

In 1967 Mr. Rodríguez was part of a United States Army Special Forces team in Bolivia that helped track down Ché Guevara, the Argentine-born revolutionary colleague of Mr. Castro.

In Vietnam, friends say, Mr. Rodríguez worked in helicopters of the C.I.A.'s proprietary airline, Air America, and was shot down five times. In the mid-70's, friends say, he began receiving a United States Government disability pension.

In 1979 and 1980, Mr. Rodríguez worked as an arms broker in Miami and later, for about two years, served as an adviser to the Argentine military.

Donald P. Gregg, the national security adviser to Mr. Bush and a former C.I.A. official, has said that he recommended Mr. Rodríguez for a job with the Salvadoran Air Force at Mr. Rodríguez's request. How Mr. Posada came to join Mr. Rodríguez in the rebel supply operation is not clear.

After officer training at Fort Benning, friends say, Mr. Posada spent most of the 1960's in raids and sabotage attacks against Cuba under the direction of the C.I.A. station in Miami. In the late 1960's and early 1970's he served as an counterinsurgency advisor to the Venezuelan Army and eventually became chief of operations for its national police.

In 1974 he opened a private security agency in Venezuela and also, according to one Miami friend, began manufacturing silencers for handguns. He was arrested in October 1976 on charges of blowing up the Cuban airliner.

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